



## I.A.S: Beyond and Behind the 'News'

By Bhimeswara Challa aka CB Rau, I.A.S. (Retd.)

The Indian Administrative Service - I.A.S, for short - is in the news, mostly for the wrong reasons. Everyone is jumping in--- be it the Vice President (all is not well with the civil services, 21/4/2022), the Prime Minister (babus, I.A.S. officers, will do everything; 10/2/2021) or chief ministers, columnists, commentators and assorted retired officers. One reads headlines like "The Civil Services Have Failed to Deliver and It's Time to Reconsider Their Importance" (The Wire; 2 February 2020) and "Our PM and CMs are puppets of the IAS" (Times of India; 1 June 2019). The Modi government, although on one hand says that the States are unwilling to spare their I.A.S. officers to the Centre, on the other hand, is trying to dilute the 'monopoly' of the I.A.S. at the senior levels in the central secretariat. For some, it is a matter honest concern and for others a case of sour grapes. No one can really be neutral because almost everyone - the privileged politician, plutocrat, businessman, media-wallah, film star, and the poor common man - would have had something to do with one or the other members of the service, sometime or the other, for some take away. Indeed, in the hinterland of India, who the D.M. (District Magistrate, or District Collector as the case may be) matters more than who the C.M. (Chief Minister) or the P.M (Prime Minister) is. That makes him, if not more powerful than the latter; at least more relevant than them.

To view the matter of I.A.S. in the right perspective, we must go back to the debate in the Constituent Assembly, when this tricky issue was discussed. First, many members thought it was repugnant with the federal form of governance, and it was Sardar Patel, who 'unified' India, thought that creating the All India Services was essential for that very purpose; so fought for it and, at one point, even threatened to walk out 'with my services'. He said (Constituent Assembly, October 1949): "Remove them and I see nothing but a picture of chaos all over the country the Union will go, you will not have a united India, if you have not a good All India Service, which has the independence to speak out its mind." Seventy- two years hence, what does the record hold?

The mistake we commonly make while reviewing our state of affairs - be that of the judiciary or the I.A.S - is to view each institution in isolation. Everything is colored by context. On the subject matter, we must remember that I.A.S is not an off-the-shelf stand- alone entity, or it is an island of pristine purity in the prevailing ocean of selfishness. It is not impregnable and impervious to what 'being Indian' has come to entail and imply - attitudinally mediocre and morally susceptible. Collectively as an institution, the I.A.S. has fallen far short of its conceptual premise and potential promise. First, members of this service are the ones who have occupied key positions at the highest levels of administration and acted as key policy makers and program coordinators in successive governments. Second, without the involvement or acquiescence of one or another I.A.S. officer rarely could anything important have been done by any political authority. Having said that, the fact also is that the niche of the I.A.S. is at once over played and underestimated in that it is not as definitive and decisive

as it is generally assumed. Although the I.A.S. was created as a kind of successor to I.C.S., its cadres are by no means the kind that Philip Mason called 'The Men who ruled India (1953)'. Nor do they have, as the Prime Minister feared (10 February 2021), "the reins of the nation" in their hands. Whatever, the I.A.S. must also share the blame for the many failed policies of the past seventy-three years.

Be that as it may, in a democracy, the elected political executive that decides the policy course for a given matter - like the 1991 economic liberalization - for the 'babus' to come up with navigable tools for it to embark upon the administrative journey, albeit after going through the prescribed processes. However, at the field or operational level, it is the opposite; while carrying out the decisions taken by the government of the day the 'babus' still have a lot of elbow room for individual initiatives, apolitical judgment and the power to tilt the scales, when in doubt, toward the underdog. That is where an I.A.S. officer is expected to make a difference.

That being the case let us deal with some of the oft-repeated criticisms. The most prominent one is that they are a bunch of 'jack-of-all-trades' who move from subject to subject, much like 'birds of prey and passage', enjoy the perks and power and leave no mark behind. It is even said that 'there is no logic for recruiting directly at the top'. This cuts at the very root of the rationale behind the philosophy and *raison d'être* of the All India Services, especially the I.A.S., one of the foundational tenets of which was to create a pool of above-the-average Indian youths, through rigorous pan-Indian selection, training and moving them both vertically, (from the States to the Centre and vice versa) and horizontally (from subject to subject), as such an 'expertise', it was hoped, would balance and complement and help the political decision-making. Needless to say, such overall skills are needed now even more for the governments to balance and harmonize a variety of needs, demands, and priorities in policy making.

On the flip side it is argued that such a system will generate a paper pushing generalist but not a 'policy specialist'. Just the same, one must bear in mind that in any hierarchical set up, be it a corporation or government, different levels require different experience and expertise, and the ability to optimize other's work towards a common good, even more than one's own particular expertise is needed at the highest levels. The other criticism is that many officers live in ivory towers, wallow in cosy comfort, are overbearing and the canker of corruption has seeped into this vital citadel as well. To be frank, many in the service do concede the dilution of the moral and ethical standards of the once upright dispensation, although the reasons put forth by them vary widely. More than anything else it is this aspect that requires attention for a dishonest and unethical I.A.S. officer proves more inimical to the society at large than a non-I.A.S officer. Moreover it is far more difficult to discipline much less remove erring officials, not to speak of apprehending them. It's thus intelligence without integrity is deadly for the society.

Whatever, the way a politicians look upon the civil service has always been ambivalent, and, by and large, once there was mutual respect with attendant redlines. While taking cognizance of the state of the I.A.S. now, we must also turn our attention to the slew of changes that have been introduced across a broad spectrum of aspects such as eligibility criteria, recruitment, training, posting, and the cadre management. A cardinal principle for long has been that for an I.A.S. officer all jobs, consistent with seniority, were treated interchangeable and a particular posting was neither reward nor reprimand but all that has changed. Even as favouritism in postings and transfers is routine, vantage positions in the system, not to speak of the much sought after foreign assignments, are lobbied for, wherever possible with political clout. Even though many might not openly admit, politicians do want, *a la* Indira Gandhi and P.N. Haksar, 'committed bureaucracy'. All the same, the politicians were wary of the bureaucratic independence and its sense of security so much so that a minister once derided

a junior officer, 'you think I.A.S means 'I-am-Safe' eliciting a spirited reply, ' no sir, to me it means I-am -Straight'.

Nevertheless, politicians then were wont to recognize that the perspective of a civil servant has to be intrinsically different from that of the ruling party's interests which is necessary for good governance. Some, like Mohan Kumaramangalam in the Indira regime, used to admonish silence, discourage conformity and encourage dissent during official proceedings. In that administrative climate, civil servants tended not to think that their careers were at stake for offering honest, evidence-based advice to the political establishment. Besides, the ministers as well as the legislators tended to involve themselves in the development work which entailed direct contact and coordination with concerned officials, and that made the job of the latter challenging as well as rewarding.

However, in due course, all that has seemingly changed for the powers that be began seeing things from the political prism, reflecting the overall fall in the character and caliber of the polity itself. We must also recognize that although federally recruited and trained, much of the career of many I.A.S. officers is spent at the State level where the local factors rule the roost as the regional political dynamics prevail. In fact their tenure at the centre is called 'deputation' and contrary to the principle of rotation, some spend almost all their career in his or her State of allotment while some stay on at the centre seemingly infinitely. Needless to say this defeats the very purpose of 'rotation', the *raison d'être* of which was that the periodic exchange of places allows the officer to acquire a holistic vision and national outlook, which he or she will bring to bear in his work at both ends. So it's no surprise that non-compliance with this norm has injured both the image of I.A.S. and the Centre - State relations.

The essential feature of federalism makes the political heads of the States, the masters of the I.A.S. officers, and yet time was when they were almost apologetic to ask a District Magistrate or District Collector to do anything even remotely out of the way; so they used to merely say in private "don't do it; just look at it" too to appear publicly active in the political arena. One Chief Minister (J. Vengalrao of Andhra Pradesh) was wont to tell his officers, "when a minister complains that you listen to your secretary but not me, I tell him that he (the officer) has no axe to grind but you have." But in time the C.Ms began to expect unwavering obedience and unquestioning compliance from the cadre under their service. They have learnt to bribe or bully the officers by dangling the carrot of a 'plum posting' or the stick of 'punishment transfers'. So, it soon dawned on the officers that righteously sticking to the rule book, or exercising discretion for the common good, is not only not good for their careers but thankless even.

But it was the raise of the regional parties in some States at the expense of national political entities that ushered in coalition governments at the centre not only altered the character of the India politics but also the credo of its administrative service. The inevitable dependence of the national party in power on the continued support of the multiple regional political players for the survival of its union government gave rise to regional satraps, who began to carve out their own islands of power and influence, not brooking any central interference in the affairs of their States. It was this political quid pro quo that enabled the regional political heads to interfere and influence the administration of the Indian Administrative Service, and with that the cadre reached its nadir. It was this regional slant to political power that made the I.A.S officers in the States perceive that their careers are better served through servility to the satraps. What is worse, even their own colleagues tend to look down upon the righteous, instead of looking up to them as the role models. Some even become partners with politicians and use that chance to get rich. It is utterly baffling why anyone in his or her right mind would squander for worldly gain so much unparalleled opportunity to do so much good to so many people in a single life time.

But can we put all this mess at the door of a rotting, morally rudderless society? Maybe that is only partially true. The decline is also due to the basic changes introduced at the typology of aspirants who are now eligible to apply. One significant change made is to extend the age limits for eligibility. Originally the entry age was 21 years minimum and 24 years maximum; but now it goes from 21 all the way to 32 –37. What is more the number of allowed attempts range from 6 (general) to 9 (O.B.C) and infinite for SC / ST. There is also a quota system; at present a general category candidate has to compete only in 40.50 percent seats as 59.50 percent seats are reserved. Earlier in the 1960s and 1970s, a candidate was almost on his or her own while preparing for the U.P.S.C examinations. Except at most the family and friends there was little orchestrated help. Now the preparatory process has also become much longer and more programmable and rarely, if ever, does anyone even seek to attempt without elaborate, intricate and highly professionalized prodding from 'coaching factories'. That the coaching includes how to 'read a newspaper' tells its own tale of the aspirants to the premium service! With the largesse of nine attempts and with such ruthless 'grooming' most with a modicum of intelligence should be able to 'crack' the exam'. They are almost, as it were, 'fabricated', making 'perspiration more important than inspiration'.

Moreover, those aspiring to enter the service in their mid-thirties, would have either remained unemployed thus far reflecting on one's character or caliber and / or both or would have gainfully occupied to possibly imbibe the attendant work culture for 'success' in the corporate rat race. Either way, such a person, if given the leadership responsibilities with easy avenues for avarice, is more likely to go astray, particularly when he or she sees everyone around 'having a good time'. One can wonder if all these changes, each well meant, have in anyway diluted the bedrock hypothesis of ensuring the entry of raw, fresh, spontaneous, idealistic young Indian yet unspoilt by the compromised social mores. Given that uprightness of its offices is the bedrock of the I.A.S. it is the upright and not the fallible in its ranks that further its character and quality. The government must innovate a way to give all the affirmative support and encouragement that the youth of disadvantaged sections need while at the same time not diluting the very conception of such a service.

So, what needs to be done? First, let us not either throw the baby with bathwater or miss the wood for the tree. The baseline fact still remains that, as a World Bank Report published in the 1970s noted, the Indian Administrative Service was an "extraordinary pool of skills and talents." As I worked at the United Nations' Headquarters as a member of the International Civil Service for nearly twenty-years and having interacted with some of the 'brightest and best' in the world, I can unequivocally endorse that assessment. Maybe the luster of I.A.S. has dimmed a bit but, I believe, is not beyond a vigorous burnish as it has always been, and even now, is the highest aspiration for the Indian youth and the one avenue open to one and all. Unlike in the initial decades when most recruits were urban, middleclass and drawn from elite colleges, in recent times it has become more representative of the real India and has seen the heartwarming entry of the sons and daughters of marginalized sections and working class from India's remote parts, who literally study under the street lights, to break the class barrier and move up the social ladder. In that sense it is already a 'unifier' as Patel envisioned.

We must also not lightly disregard the utility of the broad, almost reflexive, respect I.A.S. carries with the general public which has been a stabilizing factor through all the vicissitudes and turbulence that the country had gone through. However, the Service is at its best at the crisis times and uncommon calling. Without the I.A.S in the field there can be little doubt we wouldn't have done what we are so mighty proud of – holding -, yes, free and fair - 17 general elections in the face of daunting odds and formidable logistical hurdles. Many young officers rose to the occasion at challenging times such as floods and droughts and saved lakhs of lives. Well, there are many unsung heroes who do not hit the headlines unlike the rogue elements amongst them, and that's sad. But one must also not forget they could do so partly because of

the constitutional protection given to them. We must also review the effect of changes brought in since its origin. Age eligibility and number of allowed attempts should be reduced.

However, the initial 'training' in the Academy at Mussoorie should be revisited to include courses on the two principles highlighted by Sardar Patel in his address to the first batch of I.A.S officers on 21st April 1947 - impartiality and incorruptibility. A probationer must be literally, so to speak, 'brain-washed' or 'mind-conditioned' to imbibe that maxim so that the twin attributes become almost his or her second nature. That is the kind of praxis that we need in today's India and the service must go back to what it was supposed to be. Now, for all practical purposes, it is either a 'federal service' - when serving at the centre - or State service - while in the States; not practically an All-India service. The 'rotation' principle should be strictly adhered to. Indeed each officer should be made to serve in another 'distant' state for a length of time.

When all is said and done, the reality is that the country needs a top class 'professional civil service' now more than ever. But it must be attuned to the changing times. We need to evolve a new *modus operandi* to ensure that the political executive and the permanent executive work in tandem and harmony. That calls for a radical reorientation of the mindset of the two of them - neither should adopt an attitude of condescension or contempt towards the other. The bottom line is this: so long as the present quasi-federal and 'neither-fish-nor-fowl' constitution is extant, the need for something like the I.A.S. will remain, and a new constitution with a different paradigm of governance - fully federal or wholly unitary - might not need it. In the meantime, let us fix the deficiencies and mistakes made and stop nibbling at it and name-calling. And then again, who amongst us in this blessed but hapless land can throw the first stone?

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